The New Civic Vanguards: The Press and Public Opinion

For the first time placed at the head of a civic procession, the Italian press emerged as a vanguard social and political institution during the Dante Festa. One hundred members of the press, “illuminatori della publica opinione” (as ironically dubbed by the oppositional La Civilta Cattolica), led the other Italian political and social bodies from Piazza Santo Spirito to Piazza Santa Croce, where the inauguration ceremony took place. Moreover, while all other corporations, mutual aid societies, schools, academies, associations, and cities were aligned with their respective provinces, the representatives of the various Italian presses formed one unit, as if guiding the nation. The press, appearing as a national institution, transcended local and provincial identifications.

The actual condition of the Italian press did not match its image as projected by the festa. Freedom of expression, granted with unification, was grounded on the Liberal notion that the free concorrenza of individuals, as well as the diffusion of ideas, would secure a “harmonious and orderly progress of the community” (“armonico e ordinato progresso della collettività”). The task of the modern national press was to build an active political culture. Despite the law granting this liberty, censorship, arrests, and the watchful eye of the Questura, were the norm. Regionalized and municipalized, journalism also suffered from a weak and uncritical “readership,” hence a fragile market, since 75 percent
of Italians were illiterate. Luigi Lodi, an early historian of Italian journalism holds that these organs with very limited readership functioned exclusively as instruments of political propaganda.\textsuperscript{6} Without a sustainable audience, “political proselytism” was the raison d’être of Italian journalism in the postunification decade.\textsuperscript{7} Newspapers and journals, vehicles of propaganda, sustained the interests of, and the polemics between, the various political factions.\textsuperscript{8}

Contemporary figures, politicians, and journalists alike self-consciously recognized and commented on this matter: the dire condition of the Italian press. Gaspero Barbèra, for example, dubed it “infantile” and “undisciplined.”\textsuperscript{9} Ricasoli “trembled” at both the “ineptitude” and “malevolence” of the contemporary journalist.\textsuperscript{10} Carlo Fenzi, editor of the organ of the Tuscan Moderate group, \textit{La Nazione}, when describing to Bettino Ricasoli the affairs of the Centenary, and praising Florence’s great success as host, adds the following concerning the embarrassing status of Italian journalism:

\begin{quote}
Considering that the condition of periodicals in Italy is hardly satisfactory, it is necessary to find a remedy. In fact, if the situation continues in this way, besides making a meager impression before the rest of civilized Europe, our people will undergo a slow moral poisoning rather than receive a proper education.\textsuperscript{11}
\end{quote}

Regardless of whether it judged the press to be the agent of a “moral poisoning” or of the “proper education” of the populace, the ruling elite deployed the media as the privileged pedagogical instrument for the project of nationalizing Dante prior to and after the Centenary. The press, in fact, was turned into an integral component of the political rites developed for the national event. The press emerged as the institutional choice of the Dante Centenary Commission as the latter publicized the festa, horizontally, across the territory of the state; and vertically, among the popular classes. Friendly and oppositional ideological/political blocs, subsequently responded with a plethora of words to this public relations campaign. In effect, contemporary journals, reviews, newspapers, and satirical periodicals, commenting on the festa, carried out a “culture war” that crystallized around the event.